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THE BIBLE AND THE PROLETARIAN MOVEMENT

HARRY F. WARD
Union Theological Seminary, New York City

The proletarians were defined long before Marx gave them their classification in modern industrial society. In ancient Rome the proletarii, as the term clearly indicates, were those who had nothing to give to the state but their children. In a time when citizenship meant rendering service to the state they were without civic standing. Having no property, they could neither pay taxes nor make contributions. In early times they were exempt from military service, being considered unfit for such arduous duty—as they doubtless were. Their labor was not counted as a contribution to the state. Later they were given some slight representation in the parliamentary assembly and were called into military service, but they remained a propertyless class with practically no social or civic privilege. Their protest against their lot is registered in the record of successive slave revolts and labor wars.

The modern proletariat cannot be so sharply defined despite the attempt of Marx and the scientific school of socialism to limit the classification to the wage-workers created by modern industrialism, most of whom have no property stake in the commonwealth, owning neither land, house, tools, nor a job. The proportion of the propertyless to the entire population in this country increasingly approaches the situation in Europe and increasingly includes others than the industrial wage-workers. In this classification the tenant farmer mostly belongs, and also that overwhelming proportion of farm owners whose net labor income averages around five hundred dollars a year. Moreover an increasing number of professional

workers have nothing to contribute to the state but their children, and not many of them, as the cost of living increasingly limits the realization of their ideals of life. The economic classification of the proletariat, however, cannot be limited to the propertyless. It must include all those who are unable to acquire sufficient property for family security or for the realization of any influence in the control of community life or the state.

The real line between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is not, however, economic but psychological and ethical. It marks the difference between those who possess a consciousness of needed social change and those who have none, being perfectly content with things as they are; between those who want power transferred from the few to the many and those who believe in the divine right of the select, self-chosen minority to rule; between those who are continually haunted by a sense of injustice because of the inequalities of life and those who enjoy them without compunction, though with much gratuitous compassion for the less fortunate; between those whose spirits constantly rebel against the social results of the capitalist mode of production and distribution and those who accept the present social order as ordained from the beginning of things and destined to continue while life remains upon this planet.

In due course the proletariat has caused a proletarian movement, a movement seeking a better social order, struggling for more freedom, more justice, more fraternity, for all people and believing that this cannot be realized without a reordering of the economic affairs of the world. This movement is world-wide and constitutes the largest single grouping of beings upon this planet. Its different divisions are increasingly in contact with each other, and while they differ radically and violently concerning strategy and tactics, yet on the whole it moves steadily in one direction—toward the securing of increased welfare and power for the masses of humanity. Increasingly this movement draws into its service literature,

art, religion, and science. For these, if they are true to themselves, must serve the many and not the few. They live and move and have their being only as they pass the barriers of class and nationality and race and become the servants of universal humanity.

This proletarian movement constitutes a social phenomenon whose like the world has not yet seen. Other social orders have felt the strain of protest and sustained the shock of revolt from the suffering and oppressed, but never before has the age-long organization of society to give power and privilege to the few sustained the impact of an educated, enfranchised, proletariat, increasingly conscious of the causes of its situation, of the goal toward which it needs to travel, and of the means of social change. Already the proletarian movement is the deciding force in European affairs, and its day is only dawning. In the very nature of the case this movement will shape the society of tomorrow; it will determine the manner of living in the near future for the greater part of the world because it contains within itself the undeveloped forces of humanity.

If this be the situation, or indeed anywhere near to it, then those who are studying, teaching, and preaching the Bible because they believe it contains the truths by which alone the feet of humanity can be guided into the way of life will need to inquire what relation, if any, there is between the principles taught in the Bible and those around which the proletarian movement is forming, and also what likelihood there is that the teaching of the Bible will influence a movement which has already become so powerful.

On the Continent of Europe the attitude of the proletarian movement toward the Bible ranges from indifferent cynicism to violent antipathy. This attitude is the product of the state churches, and in this respect there is little to choose between the Roman, Greek, or Lutheran organizations. As institutions they have been about equally successful in generating hostility not only to themselves but to the religion they

represent and the book they teach. The Tolstoian interpretation of the gospel, the work of a few genuine Christian socialists in Central Europe—particularly in Switzerland—has scarcely dented the hostility or penetrated the suspicion which the ecclesiastical hierarchies of Europe have for centuries been breeding in the minds of the awakening proletariat.

As usual, the church's sin of omission has been greater than its sin of commission. The attitude of European socialism toward the Bible is based upon ignorance, and for this ignorance of course the church is responsible. The intellectual leaders of the proletariat of Europe do not know the Bible as it is known to modern scholars nor even to children in modern American Sunday schools; but they do know how the Bible has been used in Europe—at its best to furnish a scheme of eternal insurance for the individual, and at its worst to provide a religious sanction for the existing order, to sustain alike the aristocracy of feudalism and the plutocracy of industrialism while urging the subjects of both to be content with that station in life in which it has pleased God to place them. From the day when Luther first turned against the peasants and encouraged the nobles to slaughter them, to the day when the Roman church organized labor and Christian socialist movements under its own control in order to prevent fundamental economic change, the main social function of the official teachers of the Bible in Europe has been in the eyes of the leaders of the proletarian movement nothing but the betrayal and defeat of the common people. It is due to this historic record and to their ignorance of any other meaning or use for the Bible that they are instilling the socialist movement of Europe with hostility toward it as a name and passing on a heritage of indifference toward its contents.

In the English-speaking world the situation is somewhat different, due to the connection in England between the pre-reformation attempt to give the Bible to the common people and the proletarian struggle over the land question. The work

of the Lollards and of Wycliffe was intimately associated with the successive protests and rebellions of sturdy English yeomen against the encroachments of a decadent feudalism and later a rising monarchism upon their ancient privileges and possessions, particularly the latter. The "poor preachers" both read the Bible in the villages and urged the people to take back the land which belonged to them. The slogan of that struggle was a scriptural allusion: "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?" It is on record that when one of the later attempts to seize the land was put down, scores of priests were hunted out and hanged as being the prime movers in the rebellion.

From these historic beginnings a religious strain has always run deep through the English labor movement. The relation between the development of lay preaching in the evangelical revival and the subsequent leadership of the trade union and socialist movements in England is another link in the chain which binds together the proletarian movement in Great Britain and the teachings of the Bible. Save for a small secularist wing, whose influence is practically negligible, the literature of the labor movement in England continually appeals to biblical ideals, and the addresses of its leaders, like so much of the best public speaking in England, are saturated with the phraseology of the King James Version. It was therefore no accident that one of the counts in the indictment against one of the ministerial leaders of the general strike in Winnipeg was that on his desk were found leaflets containing a quotation from Isaiah—nothing else—and that when public meetings in the open air within the city limits were prohibited the working people gathered by hundreds outside the city limits and sang, "Faith of our Fathers living still, In spite of dungeon, fire and sword," and a Scotch workingman led in prayer, being "reminded of the covenanting days when they drove our fathers out on the moors."

In the United States the attitude of the proletarian movement to the Bible, like the movement itself, is a conglomerate of all that is to be found in Great Britain and in Europe. The foreign-born section is mostly antagonistic. A Protestant preacher of Russian birth came before a large audience of Russian radicals with a Bible in his hand. When they found out what it was, they yelled, "Take it away, don't dare to come before us with that outworn Book." But they agreed to listen to one sentence and when they heard, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free," most of them agreed to join with the preacher in a common search for the truth. Among the American-born proletarians most of the leaders were raised in church and Sunday school in the days when individualism and otherworldliness were dominant. They left in despair or disgust before historical or social science had touched the message of pulpit or Sunday-school teacher; and the kind of pulpit utterances that get into the Monday-morning papers have not changed their view. One of the theological students sent last summer by certain home-mission boards to work and observe in the lumber industry of the Northwest has recorded the attitude of his fellow-workers, mostly I.W.W.'s, toward those appointed to preach to them:

The chief objection to the logging preachers was that they tried to make the loggers believe that the world was created 4004 B.C., that the sun stood still, that prophecies of the Bible have all come true, or will come true, and that God created the world. I heard many long discussions about what fools preachers were to believe such stuff, and then they would turn to me to see whether I was shocked, and try to get me to argue. Needless to say, it didn't take long to convince them that I had heard of the recent discoveries of modern science and also, before long, several of them came to me secretly and got me to read the Bible and explain it to them.

There are some other elements whose strength cannot yet be determined. The farmers of this country are fast becoming proletarians in fact and in thought. They are now mostly in church and Sunday school and supposed to be getting Bible

teaching. It remains to be seen whether this will affect their economic and social program, or whether, as it did with the industrial wage-workers, the church will let them drift away and work out their social salvation without any religious consciousness. There is also considerable strength going into the American proletarian movement from the ranks of applied science, because of the fact that science seeks the good of all and, to effect its program, must align itself with the many rather than with the few. It is likely that the American proletarian movement will be much more genuinely scientific than that of Europe, because its science will be less dogmatic and more specific. This wing is largely indifferent or hostile to what it believes to be Bible teaching, because of the mishandling of the Bible to which it has been subjected. Its ideals and principles of life are, however, biblical in a large degree, though not recognized as such.

There is yet another element to be reckoned with. There are a few preachers who have left the church and chosen the labor movement as a field for spiritual leadership. There are some others who have stayed in the pulpit and have gained the ear of the proletarians to a remarkable degree. These two groups of men have a common spirit and aim. They know the results of modern biblical criticism, they have read and weighed Rauschenbush, Kent, Peabody, Wallis, Soares, and Bouck White. If any connection is to be established between the proletarian movement in this country and the teachings of the Bible, it will be through the work of these men and their successors. Through them the social need and aspiration of the present may be nourished and guided by the ideals and experience of the past.

The method by which alone this desirable result can be achieved is clearly indicated by the present situation. It will not be through the appropriation of scriptural language as in England, for the growing use of new and improved translations prevents it. It will not be the proof-text method, taking some

particular teaching evoked by an ancient social condition and using it in a situation entirely different to sanctify some particular scheme, for the reason that most of the schemers have no biblical knowledge, and those proletarians who have it utterly repudiate such unhistoric and unscientific procedure, being quite content to leave that method to the expository preachers of the individualistic school. The method that is being used by those preachers who have acquired any influence over the proletarian movement is to ask what are the general social principles of the Bible, to trace their historic development in the scripture records, to analyze our modern society in the light of them, and to ask what kind of a social order they require us to seek.

The result is not pattern or plan but movement and direction. The study of the scripture record, compared with such other records of the past as we have, shows us the main direction in which the ideals and aspirations, the hopes and strivings, of humanity have pointed, shows us also some progress in fact. The goal is not clearly seen, "it doth not yet appear what we shall be," but not a few preachers have found that when the social principles of the Bible are revealed to the proletarians they recognize that these principles point to a way of life in which they want and need to go, and in which in the main the proletarian movement is trying to go. Witness the appropriation of Jesus by the English-speaking proletarian movement, despite all the materialistic propaganda of scientific socialism. This movement claims Jesus not for a scheme or a program, as the ecclesiasts and exegetes of all schools have constantly done, but as the voice of the needs, longings, and hopes of the common people, the embodiment of their ideals, the champion of an order of life which would bring more good to them and their children than they have ever had.

Of course such a mass judgment is uncritical, of course it is based more on sympathy than on knowledge; but who shall say that it is farther from the truth concerning the human

Jesus than the work of those who have turned a carpenter into a king to sanction imperialism in church and state? Is it not considered an evidence of the spiritual authority of the Bible that the individual soul can turn to it for comfort in every experience? Why, then, should not the mass movement of humanity find similar comfort, and with less danger of misleading, since the Bible is the record of the progressive experience of God in the life of a nation, a community, and a world-wide fellowship, since it discovers and emancipates the individual as a member of this fellowship, which a monarchical heritage insists upon calling "the Kingdom of God"?

The affinity between biblical teaching and the proletarian movement and the possibility of relation between them in the future appear at once when we ask, What were the ruling principles, the chief features, the dynamic motives, of the kind of society that was sought by the law and the prophets; what kind of social order would follow from the teachings of Jesus, what kind has been aimed at by those who have definitely endeavored to put his teachings into practice? If this question is put negatively biblical teaching and the proletarian movement cover more common ground than when it is put positively. Both of them are continually protesting against the world as it is, because of the amount of injustice and oppression, inequality and suffering, that is in it. The mint and anise and cummin of biblical criticism may now and again be tithed for the world as it is, but no one can make the prophets of Israel stand for the privileges and powers of kings, emperors, or plutocrats, turn the Hebrew codes into instruments for the perpetuation of slums and devitalized countrysides, or transform Jesus into a court chaplain of the rich and the powerful. Not all the softening of the Third Gospel because of its Ebionitic character (it is passing strange to hear trained scholars speak of the "socialism of Luke") can soften the impact of all the Gospels against the manner of life of the rich and powerful and against its consequences for the many.

Was it instinctive or conscious self-preservation that so long made it a crime for the common people to read in the vernacular "that he hath put down the mighty from their seat and exalted them of low degree," while it was constantly chanted to them in Latin?

On the positive side, the outstanding fact is that the biblical teaching makes for a fraternal organization of life, it conceives religion and social organization alike in family terms, it seeks to produce the fraternal individual in the fraternal community, finally on a world-wide scale and for endless time. Its goal is a divine society in which God dwells with all men as his children. This concept of social solidarity, this ideal of a fraternal community and a world-wide family, makes for equality. That it should be claimed in support of impossible schemes of equalitarian communism is not so important as that those who accept it are impelled to move against the inequalities of life and for the extension of privilege steadily in the direction of equality. At this point the biblical ideal has a clear and strong affinity for the proletarian movement which is seeking to bring great masses of men up from the bottom of society into a larger life. The whole missionary and educational program of modern Christianity is thrown in this direction, but here the biblical teaching brings the experience of the past to help the present, avoid an imminent danger—the danger of seeking a short cut to solidarity and universal well-being through class control sustained by force.

The Hebrew law stands for the producer as against the possessor, because its ideal of life is production as against possession, creative service as against sensual enjoyment and power. The gospel teaching warns us that solidarity can no more be achieved by the dictatorship of any class than by the rule of the strong men of old; that the proletarian movement can succeed only in so far as it is for the interest of the whole, only as it can produce more creative service than any other movement. This is the wisdom of experience, because the

biblical ideal of solidarity is historically rooted in the unity of the patriarchal family, the clan and the tribe, whose ethic the Hebrew religious teachers kept alive in their nation through all submissions to ancient imperialism and its class-divided society, because they put behind it, "thus saith the Lord." From this background Jesus came to know that those who would unify society, instead of seeking to rule it must be willing to serve it and, if need be, die for it. He came also to know that a fraternal world cannot be secured by force and violence or any other form of external compulsion. From the ancient *lex talionis* the Bible teaching moves away until it reaches the New Testament principle of overcoming evil with good and subduing hate with love; but those who have been using the Bible to justify and sanctify the use of force for nationalistic ends are somewhat disqualified from proclaiming to the proletarian movement that the teaching of Jesus is against the use of force for social ends.

Unless the central truths of the Bible can become the conscious principles of the proletarian movement, unless that movement can be made aware of the relationship, both historic and factual, between biblical teaching and its own aspirations and needs, it is likely to repeat the mistakes of the past and perhaps on such a scale as to make them irreparable. To do its part in averting such a disaster the church needs to train and set loose a body of men competent to carry the living word to a living movement, that both of them may make for a growing society.